

## How (Not) to Treat Job Candidates

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By [MARK J. DROZDOWSKI](#)

Career advice for administrative staff members in fund raising and development

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A few years ago, I interviewed for a development job at a major university, and I'm still waiting to hear from the search committee. Every day, I race home to check the mail, and I continually call my answering machine looking for a message. I remain optimistic, but at some point I'm going to assume they chose someone else.

Seriously, though, I was initially surprised by that turn of events. During my three trips to the campus for interviews, including some with senior officials, everyone treated me well. When I became a finalist, the university paid for my travel, put me up in a posh hotel the night before my marathon of meetings, gave me dinner, and offered to pay for another evening if I found myself too tired to trek home. All along, the hiring manager took great pains to keep me apprised of the search's progress, letting me know how interested the committee was in my candidacy.

Then ... nothing. Weeks passed. I sent a "just checking in" e-mail, which prompted no reply. I hesitated to call, concluding after a time that I was not the chosen one. I suppose I expected someone to call me, or at least to send a letter offering some form of closure. Instead, the university let silence convey its message.

Since then, I have experienced this treatment more than once, so I get the feeling it may be epidemic. But why do development offices (and perhaps other departments on campuses) carefully court job candidates, only to mistreat them once they're no longer under consideration? Don't fund raisers worry about their institution's reputation and ability to attract future candidates?

In my estimation, hiring managers or search committees have an obligation to everyone who applies for jobs they advertise. Of course, that obligation varies, based on how far candidates make it in the search process. At the very least, we should send all applicants a postcard saying their materials landed safely, or return e-mail messages to those who submit a résumé electronically. People who are clearly not qualified and who warrant no consideration whatsoever should receive a letter thanking them for their interest and letting them down gently.

I've heard plenty of stories from development professionals who applied for jobs and never heard boo. Why leave folks guessing?

Correspondence to those candidates who are likely to merit attention should contain more details -- for instance, some indication of an institution's timeline. That's something I've rarely seen those letters include. Instead, they arrive with the standard "We'll call you if we're interested" message, which I already know.

Now, no one ever said development departments rush through the hiring process, and professionals in the field understand that decisions can take longer than an elephant's gestation. But if we're collecting résumés in September and not making initial calls until after the committee meets in early November, we should say so. If we have a target period for interviews, why not reveal when it is? Instead, we jealously guard our timelines and details of the search process, preferring a shroud of secrecy that often mistakenly conveys lack of interest.

Once a person visits a campus for an interview, the relationship becomes personal. As such, each candidate deserves a more consistent channel of communication and deserves to be kept in the loop while the search slogs along. If we've promised interviewees a timely response and our search committee meeting gets delayed by two weeks, we should inform them. A simple e-mail message will do. Otherwise, candidates could conclude, erroneously, that they're out of the mix. In the meantime, they might take another offer. After all, if they are candidates at our institution, chances are they are pursuing opportunities elsewhere, too.

Even after we've identified our Golden Boy (or Girl), we sometimes still don't get it right. I remember serving on a search committee that labored for almost a year to find the right candidate. Goldie miraculously appeared toward the end of the search, impressed the committee, and seemed eager to accept an offer. We on the committee were equally eager and anticipated making the call quickly.

Our human-resources director, however, reminded us that one additional person, a vice president three administrative levels above the fray, needed to sign off on the hire. Due process could not be denied. The problem was that said vice president had just embarked on a two-week vacation. Not wanting to tip our hand prematurely, we didn't inform the candidate of the unfortunate delay. By the time the vice president returned and gave us his "Yeah, fine," it was too late. Goldie had landed on a competitor's shores.

Returning for a moment to my opening scenario, let's consider how we treat finalists who aren't offered the job. At best, we'll call them promptly, thanking them for taking time to interview and showing interest in our institution.

Sometimes we're forced to let Silverado simmer a bit while waiting for Goldie to accept or decline an offer; we don't want to eliminate close seconds just yet. At worst, we treat people like I was treated -- with neglect. We've zeroed in on making Goldie happy, and applaud ourselves for a search well done. Meanwhile, the personal touch doesn't extend to other finalists anymore.

Somewhere in between is the bizarre letter we'll send a couple of months later announcing Goldie's hire. It's an indirect way of telling finalists they didn't make it (as if they didn't know by then). I've received my fair share of these. "We're pleased to announce that Bob Frapples has been hired as the new director of development. Bob comes to us from Nowhere State, where for seven years he served as director of major gifts." So now I know who the search committee thought was better. I'll be sure to congratulate Bob at the next conference.

Things can get a bit complicated when a consulting firm manages the search. The consultant and the institution need to determine with clarity who is responsible for communicating with applicants at every stage of the search. I've worked with many consultants and seen too many instances of "I thought you were handling that part." I prefer to have the consultant control correspondence with candidates who don't make the interview stage. But once people come to the campus, the hiring manager or the search committee, or at least the human-resources office, should take over. The relationship has now become an interaction between the candidate and the institution, and the communication should reflect that personal connection. And someone from the institution, not the consulting firm, should make the offer and follow up with other finalists.

Over the past dozen or so years, I've been a job candidate, a hiring manager, and a search-committee member. In that time I've come to realize one immutable fact: No search is perfect. But we can follow simple rules to ensure they're (don't quote me on this term) candidate-centered.

The development community is relatively small, and people do talk. They compare notes about how universities conduct searches. Do you want your institution to gain a reputation for mistreating candidates? Do you want to dissuade talented people, who might be perfect for future positions at your campus, to avoid seeking employment with you? Why make enemies?

Given my experience with the institution that snubbed me, I probably wouldn't consider applying for another fund-raising position there, nor would I respond favorably to a search firm representing that university. The development managers left a foul taste in my mouth. And assuming they've treated others similarly, I imagine I'm not alone in my opinion. Too bad for them.

*Mark J. Drozdowski, director of corporate, foundation, and government relations at Franklin Pierce College in Rindge, N.H., writes a regular column about careers in university fund raising and development.*

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